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U.S. Marshals Joining Search For Nazi Death Camp Doctor

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

United States marshals have begun searching for the Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele with interviews in West Germany and possibly other countries, according to officials and specialists familiar with the investigation.

Justice Department officials reiterated yesterday that they were assuming the notorious death camp doctor was alive — he would have turned 74 last week — but acknowledged they had no proof nor any reliable information on his whereabouts.

"We are working with a number of foreign governments that are assisting us," said Howard Safir, associate director for operations of the United States Marshal's Service, which usually pursues Federal escapees and performs domestic law enforcement work.

Mr. Safir said a special unit had been formed to hunt for the fugitive but he declined to give its size or provide other details.

Marshals Go to Germany

Others involved in the investigation said, however, that marshals had been to West Germany to question several jailed drug smugglers said to have been close to Dr. Mengele in Paraguay, his last confirmed residence.

The Marshal's service was directed by Attorney General William French Smith in February to join the hunt for Dr. Mengele, who is wanted by West Germany for mass killings and pseudo-medical experiments at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp during World War II.

As part of the inquiry, the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations is also checking into a report that Dr. Mengele may have been arrested and freed by the American military authorities in Vienna in 1947.

The account, by a postwar American counterintelligence agent, has proved difficult to verify and has raised many complex questions, according to one of the investigators.

Neal M. Sher, director of the special operations unit, said he would not go beyond his remarks Monday at a special Senate hearing in Philadelphia, where survivors of the Nazi horror were holding a conference. In response to a question there, Mr. Sher said he believed Dr. Mengele was alive and would be captured.

No New Information

Specialists in and out of Government said yesterday that Mr. Sher's comments were not meant to suggest that the Government had any new information or that any breakthrough was imminent.

But the involvement by the United States marshals is new.

Mr. Safir said the force of 2,400 marshals — Federal sheriffs, he called them — had extensive experience here and abroad tracking down such highly wanted fugitives as Christopher Boyce, the escaped spy, and Edwin Wilson, the renegade former intelligence agent-turned-arms dealer.

Like other Federal law enforcement agents, marshals carry arms and engage in undercover operations, Mr. Safir said.

In foreign countries, however, marshals must operate with the approval of the host government and have no authority to arrest non-Americans. In Paraguay, for example, they would have to get the Paraguayan authorities to make an arrest.

Officials said that the Central Intelligence Agency was providing information to American Government investigators but was not taking a lead role in the Mengele search.

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